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Tom Henri & John Hutnyk

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Contexts for Distraction

Tom Henri and John Hutnyk

This paper discusses the events of August 2011 through our reading of a series of reports and responses by academics and commentators. These are critically and collectively evaluated as lacking in so far as we see the deployment of gang-talk, the promotion of role models, narrow-cast notions of race and platitudes about the justice system as a distraction from wider issues. Providing context for "reading" the riots/uprisings, we suggest that, at stake in each case, we see the limits of a scholarly commentary that remains unprepared to address the conflict and turmoil of "Big Society" austerity thinking.

This paper is a critical response to both the events of the popular uprisings of August 2011, which have come to be known as the London Riots,¹ and the subsequent research, policy and media outputs of various institutionally based reporters, analysts and academics in the year that has followed. We examined a range of texts to identify rhetorical devices that we refer to collectively as a set of diversionary and attention-distracting "Jedi mind tricks".² That is, we argue that a variety of commentators on the uprisings deploy a series of media-biased psych-operations or sleights-of-hand in the construction of an apologetic popular discourse on the events of August 2011. These diversionary devices could be constructed as distractions from both the meanings and implications of the disturbances, which would otherwise be obvious and more widely recognised. Hence, these are "mind tricks". We use a phrase derived from the well-known intergalactic ideological practice, associated with clerical

1. Not only in London of course, but tourism authority branding belies the spread to nearly every city in England in the days after the first night in Tottenham.

2. In Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope armed storm troopers searching the planet Tatooine for "droids" (robots) are sent on their way by Obi Wan Kenobi (Alec Guinness), using his superior mental control of "the force". It is our contention that a similar, but much diminished, mode of distraction operates in the search for "explanations" of the August riots in the UK in 2011. From David Cameron's electorate-pandering declarations of a war on gangs, to the more nuanced insistence of organisations like the Centre for Social Justice that his policy "is not working" (Centre for Social Justice, 2012) and even in the respected *Guardian*/LSE research reports or the works of philosopher-pundits like Slavoj Zizek, the effort to explain away the uprising deserves a more critical eye.

force and power, because often the ruse of “commentary” is used to conceal and obscure significance and to provide legitimacy for reactionary politics.

The distractions we identify here include more obvious moves such as employment of insecurities about class and race to push a security agenda, and stereotyping of class positions and racial profiles. There is also a trick of the market which casts the evil of “shopping with violence” as a rhetorical application that obscures deeper insecurities about consumption. Another trick pushes an “austerity discourse” which relies upon identifying “rioters” in ways that psychologise and pathologise participants in the uprising. This ploy has the capacity to simultaneously confirm *and* obscure the political trick *and* the market trick. Such deceptions reorient our attention from critiques of the structural conditions of the uprisings, and blinker our capacity to consider the political legitimacy of those involved. In the aftermath of the uprisings, we have identified a further “trick” that belongs to the otherwise socially validated and institutionally credentialised field of socio-cultural research; studies of the disturbances focus upon individualised “instances” that “illustrate” – for readers – the condition of “the poor” and mark out an abstract austerity as unexamined antecedent and context. We argue that this works as a partial justification for the exploitation system of wage labour and class hierarchy in a stagnant, recessionary economy. In a rough-sketch “austerity-discourse” that disguises any urgent political consideration, the trope of “the poor” is defined, promoted and maintained by the ruling class as an excuse for interventionist palliative “care”. The ruling class are self-defined in terms of their relationship with the poor as sometimes benevolent sometimes exasperated providers of understanding and policy, such that understanding *away* the material conditions of this “poor” in relation to the well-off, and the “squeezed middle”, means all causes and consequences of August 2011 can be recast as a need for “policy initiatives”, and further austerity. We see this as belonging to a deeply hierarchical history that has not denied its imperial past, so much as recast it in renditions of the old divide and rule that served so well at home and abroad. We see various manifestations of a defence of this ideology in otherwise well-meaning analysts who themselves promise to offer “better” understandings, and “deeper” reasonings. It is our view that such rhetorical sleights-of-hand feed into a grander trick; which is the trick of the UK coalition government policy agenda known as the Big Society. We will argue that the Big Society trick is about the dismantling of social infrastructure in ways that undermine hard fought-for, and as yet incomplete, frameworks of social solidarity, civic opportunity and multicultural redress. In place of State responsibility, it leaves people with a pared down set of “community involvement” tools for neo-Darwinian minimal survival in a period of imposed and unwarranted austerity.³ Clearly the Big Society is not the sole component

3. Scott Lash, speaking at a student run Centre for Cultural Studies event at Goldsmiths College in October 2010 had already pointed out that the austerity cuts were unnecessary, that the deficit shortfall was comparatively small, that the cuts were politically motivated, and that something more than cant was needed (from memory, Hutnyk).

of the dysfunctional capitalism that gives us recession, stagflation and austerity, and we do not have direct one-to-one equations that show BS as responsible for the disturbances of August 2011, nor would we say Tory policy is a consequence of the uprisings. We do insist, however, that “the riots” provided a useful screen upon which the sitting Government projects a view of the world that puts the onus of social policy back onto communities and localities while withdrawing State subsidy in the interests of corporate privilege. This is a core part of an agenda of neo-liberal flexibilisation, casualisation and lumpenisation which benefits the increasing accumulation of capital for the super-elite.

Distraction has quite an epidemiology. We identify several contexts that should be remembered as the wider scenario in which the action of August 2011 took place. These include a long history of proletarianisation and degradation of conditions for the employed, part-time, under- and unemployed workers of the UK, increasingly difficult work conditions, longer work hours, widening pay gap, and uncertainty as to opportunities, including those in training and education, increasingly vocationalised with low prospects and bleak outlook. Also a long history of race-based inequality of opportunity, under-investment in certain oft-mentioned “problem” areas, the twin scourges of gentrification and urban blight, a north–south divide in both capital and country, and a surveillance system on the streets that highlights and enforces this inequity. Ostensibly the trigger – uncomfortable pun intended – was the shooting to death of Mark Duggan in Tottenham, itself belonging to a long history of extra-judicial Police executions that shame the failure of the Independent Police Complaints Commission to prosecute any of those 1000+ UK police killings⁴ that reach across a tragic litany of names of the dead. Violent policing in the UK is only one side of an even wider global violence that involves geopolitical intrigue, imperial wars and neo-colonial reaction, divide and rule. The brutal history of capital abroad – a “history written in annals of blood and fire” Marx calls it (1867/1976, p. 875) – reaches right up to present-day wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine, Somalia and returns to the metropolitan streets as a low-level everyday anxiety about the “War on Terror”, which itself has its own differential impact, especially upon Muslims and anyone who might look suspicious, such as the Brazilian passenger on a tube in Stockwell in 2005.⁵ The

4. See the film *Injustice*, 2001 Dir Ken Fero and Tariq Mehmood, and the website of Family and Friends United. In 2011 UFF reported: “The Independent Advisory Panel on Deaths in Custody report published in 2011 stated: in total, there were 5,998 deaths recorded for the 11 years from 2000 to 2010. This is an average of 545 deaths per year” See <http://uffc-campaigncentral.net/2012/06/national-fathers-day-vigils-make-a-mark/> retrieved July 27 2012. The list of the Institute for Race Relations, maintained by Harmit Ahrwal, provides equally appalling reading: <http://www.irr.org.uk/news/black-deaths-in-custody/> - retrieved July 27 2012.

5. Jean Charles de Menezes was shot multiple times in the head on a tube carriage in Stockwell after being trailed by surveillance police under the watch of Commander Cressida Dick. The only charge brought against this action – a daytime murder of a Londoner without cause – was one of a danger to public health and safety. Those charged were acquitted and Cressida Dick was awarded the Queen’s Police Medal for distinguished service – BBC News December 31, 2009 - <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/london/8435507.stm> – retrieved August 17 2012.

Terror trick leaves all residents subject to a low-level surveillance anxiety which itself has become commodified in the CCTV-driven security State.⁶

Another context for August 2011 is of course the sometimes more promising, but not always positively resolved, wider series of global uprisings that follow from Tunisia in 2010, Egypt 2011, and in differing ways, the NATO intervention in Libya, the Indignados, or "15 M Movement", of Madrid and even the student protests in London in November and December 2010. We, however, would also recognise that listing contexts can readily become a trickster device in an article such as this. We list them and expect them to expand since the uprisings are the prism of interest for so many today, and continuing. That said, if we hold any deeper examination of such wider "contexts" in abeyance we would like to start from the premise that, despite the omniscience of so many Jedi-like analysts and their abundant commentary, there has not yet been, and perhaps cannot yet be, any clear single narrative of the events that lead up to, or from, August 2011.⁷ Certainly the contest of interpretations where everything from flashpoints of individual emotion – of which we keep to ourselves⁸ – through to pervasive and invasive imbrications of global capital flows, finance, strategy and control, does not yet make up a coherent picture that we would happily rest and accept. We see instead a sequence of interested and careerist moves to provide excuses, scapegoats and misdirection. The explanations proposed by some politicians, academics, media pundits, the police and even celebrities share more as rhetorical devices than they do as frames for insight and further action.⁹ Nevertheless, we insist – mind trick alert – that there are points of convergence where quite different specific narratives deal with otherwise similar themes and thus feed into a smaller number of meta-narratives relating to looting, gangs, policing and juridico-legal practices. As we clarify these narrower codifications, the point is that these again serve to deceive us and obscure the operations of capital and the deeper significance of the uprisings for all involved.

6. Elsewhere, one of us has written about this as a Pantomime Terror, see: Hutnyk 2011.

7. Our examination of self referential commentaries as merely promotional is not an anti intellectual position, so much as it is an attempt to question the ways in which intellectual positions, including claims for more and better analysis, are often left unexamined as regards the privilege of making, or at least publishing, any analysis at all. We have no illusions that our own work is also subject to a certain privilege.

8. The Wildcat group offer the observation that "Comment on subjective factors should be left exclusively to the subjects in question, although this right has already been usurped by countless social ventriloquists. The most it is possible to say here is that some members of a class subjected to intensive and invasive management refused at specific times and in various ways to be managed or manageable" in "Detest and Survive", http://www.wildcat-www.de/en/actual/DETEST_AND_SURVIVE.html – retrieved August 17 2012

9. We note the provocative critique of an earlier uprising, in 1982, that was helpfully republished in 2008: "The riots at least should prove a lucrative source of income for that symposium of oily rags. The Sociology of Deviancy (Wolfie Smith, Speed, Tucker and June, 1982) <http://www.revolt-againstplenty.com/index.php/recent/34-archivelocal/37-like-a-summer-with-a-thousand-july> – retrieved 16 August 2012

Political Gangs

One of the first and most obvious tricks deployed by the political class was to blame the events of the first few nights of August 2011 on gangs. The British Prime Minister David Cameron, used a speech just days after the disturbances to announce he was declaring “a concerted, all-out war on gangs and gang culture” (Cameron 2011a). Politicians have long been partial to declaring war on nebulous concepts ever since J. Edgar Hoover declared a “War on Crime” in the 1930s, as part cover for an anti-communist crusade that led to the House Un-American Activities Commission and the red-baiting of progressive film makers (no HUAC, no Star Wars, no Jedi). The ever-reliable bogeyman Richard Nixon declared a “War on Drugs” in 1971, which then became code for a military push into first Asia (see McCoy 2009) and especially under Ronald Reagan, into South America (see Vidal 2002). Other declarations of war sound more or less positive, but also turn out to have a dubious provenance – Lyndon B Johnson in 1964 declared “War on Poverty” so as to cash-in on the legacy of Kennedy and Roosevelt, and Indira Gandhi also declared “War on Poverty” – though in her case, it was *garibi hatau*, more literally “eradicate poverty”, and was in effect a campaign cover for the electoral fraud which eventually had her suspended from running in elections for six years (Chatterjee 1997).

The “War on Gangs” of course also has a cinematic bent, and involves the same sorts of cover stories, demonisations and distractions, as well as a guilty romanticisation – if we think of James Dean and Marlon Brando as rebel youth “without a cause”, any wider contextualisation of “youth” alienation is abandoned in the distraction and terror occasioned by motorcycles and leather. Brando and Dean serve to divert attention from social dissatisfaction amongst post-war Americans at the time of the “Police Action” in Korea and the early days of the Cold War. Fifty years later in the UK, gesturing to his Conservative Party base, the British leader’s gang-war talk belongs to a similar social profiling. As Cameron and his advisors are surely aware – and indeed, this is just why it is politically convenient for them – the concept of the gang, or rather the concept of a gang *of the young and poor*, has so often played a role in the construction of troubled youth, fear of others and deviance that it is beyond cliché (see Cohen & Young 1981). In old social learning and differential association theory, the more “deviants” are labelled deviant, the more likely they are to “be” deviant (Sykes & Matza 1993). Also implicit in the use of the term “gang” is a potent projection of the nihilism to be associated with anti-social working-class sensibilities, from football violence (see John King, *The Football Factory, England Away* etc¹⁰) to London’s perceived knife-crime epidemic.¹¹

10. John King’s novels on football in England in the 1990s perhaps offer the best ethnography of contemporary Britain available today.

11. Is Britain in the grip of a knife crime epidemic? <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1572908/Is-Britain-in-the-grip-of-a-knife-crime-epidemic.html> retrieved 29th August 2012.

Our argument here is that ideas about youth, the poor and criminality congeal around bogus notions of gang activity alongside anti-social behaviour and the demonisation of working class families. As Mccarthy observes:

From judgements about the status of families living on council estates, the conduct of "irresponsible" parents, to the "anti-social" actions of lower class young people, there is a certain repetitive cycle of anxieties about forms of class culture which are deemed "bad", "wrong", or in need of "correction" (Mccarthy 2011, p. 495).

Journalist, Owen Jones takes this argument further to opine that the anti-social behaviour agenda has;

[...] increased the bad reputation of young working-class kids and popularized the chav caricature (O. Jones 2011, p. 95).

Although the ASBO was a New Labour project, this mode of control has in many ways been extended by the Con-Dem Coalition. We do not think it a coincidence that New Labour's ASBO-advocate and "Respect" czar, Louise Casey is now advising David Cameron in the wake of the "riots".¹² She is "tasked this time with fixing the chaotic families of 'Broken Britain'".¹³ What is amazing here is the "intervention" Casey proposes will target the most "disruptive and chaotic" families with a "full family" perspective that combines traditional services and crisis management – drug use, domestic violence – with better parenting classes, and treatment for the "unexpected" problem of arson. Casey's report is based on interviews with just 16 "troubled families", but the project she heads will expand exponentially to "get underneath the skin" of 12,000 such families (Casey 2012, p. 3).

Proletarian gangs are often portrayed as a kind of infection of the social body, as amoral and destructive, whereas the amoral-yet-sophisticated mannered destruction of bourgeois gangs such as the Bullingdon Club convey a different class and culture aesthetic enabled by privilege. Both Cameron, the future British Prime Minister, and Boris Johnson, the future Mayor of London, each coming to power not long before the uprisings of August, were members of the "Buller" in 1987. Significant wealth is required to gain access to the Bullingdon Club, and members of the club are known for engaging a range of violent behaviours and having little regard for other people's property or the law (Pickard 2010). "What's all this then?", a pantomime policeman might be made to ask. We are tempted to say, along with Obi Wan from *Star Wars*: "these are not the rioters you are looking for; they can go about their business". When pressed by the BBC's Evan Davis on the similarities between the

12. "Riots: Louise Casey – Blair's respect tsar - to aid PM" BBC News September 7, 2011 - <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-14819727> – retrieved August 4 2012.

13. "Louise Casey's troubled families programme ignores the real problem; Patrick Butler, Guardian July 18, 2012, - <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2012/jul/18/louise-casey-troubled-families-problem> – retrieved August 28 2012.

violent behaviour of the Bullingdon club as a gang associated with violence, and the behaviour of young people involved in rioting and looting the Prime Minister replied, "We all do stupid things when we are young and we should learn the lessons" (Cameron 2011b). A far cry from Cameron's assessment of the behaviour of young people involved in the riots as, "criminality, pure and simple ... it has to be confronted and defeated" (Cameron 2011c). Despite a sociological tradition of critical teaching that warns against such bad habits, it is nevertheless the case that the code word "gang" is read in middle Britain as synonymous with black youth, knives, guns and drugs.¹⁴ The standard fears see many different commentaries portraying groups of black young people as dangerous, sanctifying the sartorial aesthetic of the hoody as a marker of violence and enacting racially-biased policing tactics such as Section 43 of the Terrorism Act 2000. All this marks being young and black as synonymous of danger. It is not a mere quirk of urban life that the Metropolitan Police Service of London stops and searches nearly 10,000 people a year under Section 43 and Section 60 of the Public Order Act 1994 (Van Bueren & Woolley 2010). The majority of these people are black and Asian young men, yet not one person stopped under this section has been charged or convicted of terrorism or a terror-related offence. We see this racialisation of perceived youth violence used by a number of commentators to undermine support for multicultural settlement, as rendered in accusations of "sleepwalking to segregation" (Phillips 2005) through to the stunning hypocrisy of blaming others for making Britain a soft target for terrorism (Prins & Salisbury 2008).

Race, Control

Despite what the Khalid Qureshi Foundation and Chelsea Ives Youth Centre have called "a thousand slurred treatises on the concept of the gang" (Mute 2011, p. 104), we note that some found it difficult to be put off by the lack of evidence of gang-involvement, for example the Governments' own report, "After the Riots" offers from its "Communities and Victims Panel":

While we know that most of the convicted rioters were not gang members, we *also know* that gangs operate in a large number of areas where the riots occurred. Some young people are exposed to imagery and attitudes associated with gang culture from an early age, which glamorizes a life of criminality outside the system and which eschews any empathy for the victims of crime (Singh 2012, p. 49 – our italics).

The report then continues to use the lack of gang evidence as a conjuring trick to deny the hierarchical and racist context of the uprisings. Take, for example,

14. Many references here are possible here, one worth reading is the Khalid Qureshi Foundation and Chelsea Ives Youth Centre text "Riot Polit-Econ" in the *Mute* special issue "Well the first thing I want to say is, politics my arse" (*Mute* Volume 3 # 2, 2011–12).

the juxtaposition of these two sentences; “We do not believe that these were race riots. Most of the convicted rioters were not gang members.” (Singh 2012, p. 25). Surely, the question to ask is how can there only be a racial-aspect to the events if gangs were involved? The equation here is that race signifies gangs in some one-to-one correspondence, but the escape clause shows the commentators as not-racist because they explicitly disavow a focus upon gangs. Actually, much was made on all sides of the gang “armistice” which lasted for four days. Showing the convoluted logic that a taboo on even talking of race is actually the preserve of racists, a closer look at language reveals this. A year after the uprisings, despite the “evidence”, the Guardian’s “crime correspondent” was able to report that “members of different gangs ... had put aside their differences” and “run amok” (Laville 2012, p. 10). The expression “run amok” has its provenance in colonial era fears of wild insurgency in the Malay Peninsula, and thereby without mentioning the lost Empire, introduces again the underpinnings of an unexamined white supremacy that reaches from colonial narrative through to the deep ruling-class anxieties of the contemporary police state.

There are, however, contexts in which proletarian youth can join gangs and engage in violence as legitimised and mandated forms of state power. It is a different kind of war on poverty, more like a war of impoverished thinking, that gives us the War on Terror. The close link between coercion and limited opportunities means that we see some young people joining the Police, or even the armed forces so as to fight in theatres of little strategic importance to their lives. Conflicts hatched amongst cabals such as those analysts of Weapons of Mass Destruction, agents of the demonisation of Muslims and the “Islamic threat” – rely upon the close-nit gang ethos called nationalism. Off to war – on poverty, drugs, or crime: it surely is the case that some youth join the army because regimented life provides their only viable means of escape from austerity – albeit with the associated risk of capture and violent death, or alternately, a role as torturer and facilitator of rendition, custody death and deportation. We note this also because in the Big Society context of the defunding of Higher Education in the UK, military sponsored education may, in the future, provide one of the few opportunities for poor young people to access tertiary places. It is no ironic accident the Conservative Government response to “disadvantage” is to deploy uniforms as a “gang” containment strategy – prison uniforms, police uniforms, army uniforms, scout uniforms, volunteer Olympic Ambassador shirts and hi-vis community service jackets as the pantomime dress-up versions of this only too real farce. In August 2012, the uniform-insanity went so far as to announce the deployment of Baden Powell’s scout packs as final solution: “The traditionally middle-class, white youth clubs often found in leafy suburbs and shire counties but not in inner cities” will be deployed in 400 new sites to “provide 10,000 more places for disadvantaged youths, including offenders, disruptive schoolchildren, children in care and the unemployed ... the cash for “uniformed” groups suggest ministers prefer more disciplined associations over less-established local services” (Sherman 2012).

It has been our contention that the politicians' trick of evoking the spectre of the gang performed the neat sidestep of articulating a popular discourse regarding insecurities about class and race without having to acknowledge it as such. We think there is an operational distinction in place that renders chav delinquency as consequent upon faulty white working-class parents, with their allegedly inadequate parenting skills, need for support and Louise Casey-led "full family" social worker intervention, whereas knife-crime gangster activity implicates black youth with guns and drugs, and requires the deployment of police units, courts, community workers and jail. That the situation is always mixed does not undermine the argument that a racist distinction is made at the level of presentation and policy. All Cameron had to do was mention gangs, at no point did he even need to mention race in order to play the race card. His white supremacy and his ruling class economic privilege were secured nevertheless – with the help of course of the Police and the Courts, who rushed to action once the uprising left the depressed areas of Tottenham and Lewisham and moved, as it did on day three, to the more respectable enclave of Ealing. We clearly see how the UK Government and their media confederates invoked gang-fear in the immediate aftermath of August 2011. We have suggested that fears based on social class and race privilege influence political thinking without the same politicians ever having to utter the terms race and class. Deep historical patterns emerge again and again, reinforced with research and learned commentary as much as by policy initiatives reconstruction and "intervention" programmes.¹⁵ No need for any acknowledgement that structural inequality based on material and social disadvantage combined with racial discrimination played a role in the events of August 2011, everyone knew what was under discussion, but no-one needed to call it.

Shopping with Violence

It is too easy to complain that "rioting" youth are merely obsessed with trainers and TVs. Rather, the insurrectionary youth seem to understand better than most what these goods are – theirs. They grasp the fetish character of commodities and the theft of property as time. In a radical way, the youth grasp, and break, the distinction between use value and exchange value. Comfortable and well-to-do neoliberals lived for years off rampant expropriation, but now as the homing pigeon of inevitable crisis heads towards their own homes with militant intent, and with them having mortgaged the future to short-term gain, they seem perversely ignorant of causes and afraid. The sorry spectacle has them rushing around the yard trying to shore up the fortress where their property, interests and profits must be defended with a bolstered repressive

15. That Louise Casey proposes an "intervention" programme for 12,000 anti-social families reminded us of the Australian Howard Government's spurious "Intervention" in outback Australia, best examined through the dark glass of Angela Mitropoulos in "Notes on the Frontiers and Borders of the Postcolony" (Mitropoulos 2007).

apparatus that secures the survival of some, and foreclosure for everyone else.¹⁶

Prioritising the needs of the market over other forms of social and economic life, as exposed over and over again in the post-Lehman Brothers bank-bail-out double-dip recession world, leads inexorably to further abstract dominance of the principle of exchange-value and the pursuit of profit, and property, by any means. Dysfunctional support for the market means use-values, and quality of life, come second even in the very domain of privilege that thrives on the margins of mercantile commerce. "Shopping with violence" effectively decouples the commodity from its exchange value, and so this serves as one of the few instances where an insight that ruptures market exchange might undo the reification of commodities as exchange or use values and offer a new take on value and commerce.

Bizarrely, the official response to the issue of shopping with violence is to provide more opportunities to shop for goods that the disenfranchised lumpenised proletariat cannot afford. In the UK Government's report on how to respond to the riots – the authors make special reference for the need for more department stores. Noted for special attention is the chain John Lewis which in Liverpool contributes over £1000 a month to charity and has had "a significant impact on the revitalization of the town centre" (Singh 2012, p. 81). The Big Society charity agenda gains a cut-price publicity coup here, in a Government report, which of course is also a political showcase – yet another example of hypocrisy and diversion. Where in the report was any extended consideration of these economic underpinnings or context?

Surprisingly, the high-profile LSE/Guardian "Reading the Riots" report also eschews such context and offers a very low horizon of empirical interviews and reportage, itself almost tabloid, so that here too any wider contextualisation, even a wrong one, is ruled inadmissible. This is why we take umbrage with the ways the issue of destruction of property was framed. The stock-standard notion is that those involved in the destruction were destroying their own communities and therefore not playing by the rules of the Big Society and, conversely, those who lost property in the disturbances or helped in the clean-up are champion role models with the required resolve to "get the community back on its feet". In the days immediately after the uprising, the press made much of the destruction of petit-bourgeois family-run businesses. The flagship case of this was the House of Reeves furniture store in Croydon, so iconic in that town that the area is known as "Reeves Corner". The Reeves family store had been on the site for 144 years before it was destroyed in a fire on the 8th August 2011. Much has been made of how this act of arson involved the perpetrator attacking his own community, and the correlate of this line involved eulogies applauding the determination of the owners to rebuild – a show of gumption for which, one year later, Nick Clegg, the Deputy Prime

16. If we must invoke the science fiction scenario of the sub-prime financial crisis, let it be through the work of Angela Mitropoulos (2012).

Minister, invited the Reeves to the London Olympics closing ceremony.¹⁷ A non-points-scoring political response would be to insist on community service for the arsonist, not a photo-opportunity for Clegg rewarding the victims with hard-to-get tickets. A wider context is that the cycle of urban regeneration relies upon a longer-term pattern of running down of city areas until the timely intervention of developer capital and Government “reconstruction” – of which the boosterism of the London Olympics is the just the latest example. The Reeves family store is the shop-front display for a bigger project.

In this context, the action-shot front-page photograph of a Polish migrant, Monika Konczyk, jumping from the burning building gained near ubiquitous coverage. Interviewed in the *The Sun*, Konczyk is cited as saying:

It is not what I expected of the English. I have never seen anything like this in Poland. Polish people are hard-working and respectable. They believe in working for a living, not stealing from others. If you want nice clothes or a new TV, you don't smash shop windows and loot them – you work to pay for them (Willetts August 13th 2011).

We do not wish to be discourteous to the losses and stress endured by Messrs Reeves or Ms. Konczyk, rather our argument here is how their misfortune is used to bolster the rhetoric of the Big Society. The Reeves family pulled their own socks up to continue their business, Monica Konczyk is a hardworking migrant who “never missed a day” of work before “Monday night’s terror” (Willetts 2011). The problem is that the presentation of these narratives – hard working community-“inspirations” and poundland-working low-wage Poles – supports the paring down of social policy to the level of the individual who will get on with things in whatever adversity. A Battle of Britain ethos, generalised for all – and Government, and the press, there to defend them in splendid, photogenic, isolation, subject to tabloid propaganda profile-opportunism and fifteen minutes of fame.

Courting Trouble

The process of furthering the demonisation and criminalisation of “deviant” youth has very real and profound consequences for all those residing in the UK, not just those identified as miscreant, deviant or anti-social. The legitimacy of representative democracy relies upon the idea of the separation of powers between the executive, the legislature and the judiciary. It is the checks and balances that occur from this separation of powers that are

17. “Nick Clegg invites owner of burnt down Croydon furniture store to Games closing ceremony” ITV News August 10 2012 - <http://www.itv.com/news/2012-08-10/nick-clegg-invites-owner-of-burnt-down-croydon-furniture-store-to-games-closing-ceremony/> For Clegg’s photo with the Reeves, see: “House of Reeves chairman Nick Cleggs guest to closing ceremony” in the Croydon Guardian August 14, 2012, http://www.croydonguardian.co.uk/news/9871819.Furniture_store_chairman_invited_to_Olympics_closing_ceremony/.

supposed to give the governed, however fragile, a sense of freedom from tyranny. We vote for a legislature, they arrange an executive, which they then hold to account; the judiciary tests the work of both bodies through the courts. However, in the aftermath of the uprisings of 2011, there was a unification of these powers that disrupted, possibly forever, the settlement of representative democracy in the UK.

On his return from that holiday to attend a COBRA meeting to respond to the unrest, and denounce the gangs, Prime Minister Cameron's statement from the steps of Downing Street, said,

I have this very clear message to those people who are responsible for this wrongdoing and criminality: you will feel the full force of the law, and if you are old enough to commit these crimes you are old enough to face the punishment (Cameron 2011c).

One week after this statement a circular from Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service instructed magistrates to disregard normal guidelines when sentencing those involved in the disturbances (Piper 2011). In fact, the custodial rate for those convicted of riot-related crimes was twice the 2010 average for those dealt with in the crown court and four-times the rate of custody for those dealt with in the magistrates' courts.¹⁸ This statistic has two important resonances: first, it defies any attempt at pretence of the separation of legal powers, which has grave implications for the founding idea of British liberal democracy. The other aspect is that, as Singleton has demonstrated by analysing postcode information from court data, the majority of those convicted of riot-related offences were from the most deprived localities in the UK (Singleton 2011). We might therefore infer that the majority of the convictions were of impoverished persons, and thus by increasing the custody-rate, the executive-branch of the government has achieved the splendid result of further criminalising the lumpen poor. Again, we do not have to leave the green zone security enclave of the mainstream media to find heavy rotation renditions of another striking photograph, this time of a young man posing with a bag of "Tesco value" rice, which he had allegedly looted.¹⁹ "Everything Must Go" was the Daily Mail's inflammatory headline – context is indeed everything, and so we can assume that if he has been arrested and convicted for the offence of looting this bag of rice in a riot he will have a much higher chance of receiving a custodial sentence than if he had merely shoplifted the same food item. We hardly need comment on the ideological dynamic at play in the sideshow of a

18. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2012/jul/04/riot-defendants-court-sentencing> – retrieved August 9, 2012.

19. "London Riots: They Stole Everything" Daily Mail August 10, 2011 – <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2024012/LONDON-RIOTS-2011-They-stole-EVERYTHING-Enfield-Clapham-shops-stripped-bare.html> – retrieved August 10, 2011 [the "alleged" is ours, for forms sake].

(white) millionaire's daughter led astray by black convicted coke dealer to think there is something amiss in using the courts for propaganda.²⁰

It should be no surprise that our analysis leans towards the conclusion that the sentencing of those involved in the uprising was politically-motivated. Presumably, the discursive justification for a significant ramping-up of custody rates was strategic thinking that this would act as future deterrence. McGuire notes, from his meta-analysis of what works in preventing crime, that there is little evidence to support the deterrence hypothesis (Maguire 2004). Having read our Foucault, or been closely advised by those who have,²¹ we feel we can largely discount deterrence as a credible explanation for the changes in sentencing that accompanied the uprisings. "Better" explanations of the increasing use of draconian sentencing may have to do with the security agenda that dominates political moves in the post September 11, 2001 civil liberties environment. Since August 2011, Britain has experienced a Royal wedding, a Royal jubilee and the Olympics and Paralympics and each of these events has been utilised to further securitise the nation in general and the capital specifically. In the year since the events of August 2011 there has been a significant increase on the already huge number of CCTV cameras in London, blast barriers have been installed in front of many more central London locations, the Police routinely patrol with automatic weapons and now we all know there are missile systems installed on the roofs of social housing in East London and in the parks of South East London. In some way, the riots provided a pretext for increasing the security and surveillance of the city and the state due to the exceptionality of the events, yet as with the militarisation of London, that – to be fair – has always been in process, the exceptionality of sentencing soon becomes the norm.

On the other hand, we assume that increased security and militarisation may also breed further dissent just as much as it will ensure compliance. We note that it was very clear the Police were on the back foot for four days in August 2011. No matter the degree to which it can later be construed as a possible training exercise – lessons to be learnt, etc. – it is astonishing to us that commentaries in the year since have not considered what a month, two months or more of "uprising" along the lines of Tunisia, Egypt or even Quebec might entail for London. Indeed, it surprises us that in academic commentary only textbook approaches have been countenanced. The LSE/Guardian research to "read" the riots (see Roberts 2011) involved a large number of interviews with people claiming to have engaged in rioting and looting. We have to leave aside the sedentary apolitical stance of merely *reading* riots here – indeed, we think *more* reading is required, not of the "social as text", but rather of some politi-

20. "Gangster who joined millionaire's daughter Laura Johnson on looting spree jailed for dealing crack cocaine" Telegraph April 5, 2012 – <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/crime/9188299/Gangster-who-joined-millionaires-daughter-Laura-Johnson-on-looting-sprees-jailed-for-dealing-crack-cocaine.html> – retrieved August 27 2012.

21. Many thanks to our colleague, and prisons expert, Sophie Fuggle for comments that have helped further this text.

cal theory texts, for example, and in a critical way, the commentaries we have been examining here. We approach "Reading the Riots" with caution against its staging of verbatim reportage, its citation-quotation-ventriloquy, and its from-the-curb authenticity claims. Despite the scale and profile of the Guardian/LSE project, it appears, as lossifidis and Thomas (2012) note, that the authors of the research fail to assert the veracity of their work from claims that you cannot trust the views expressed by the participants as they were criminals. We are particularly interested that one of the key findings of the "Reading the Riots" research was that much "behaviour" was motivated by hatred of the police. Yet, the analysis of the interviews with those involved in the uprising fails at the same time to broach any stated motives for police-hatred in the context of neoliberal labour market "control". If it is the case that *many* of the research participants described their first-hand experiences of police brutality, racialised and classed discrimination, indiscriminate stop and search, and the extra judiciary killing of Mark Duggan, it is then underwhelming that the researchers meekly assert that;

One reason for hostility towards the police could be that two-thirds of those interviewed said they had been cautioned by the police or convicted of an offence in the past. The riots provided a long-sought opportunity for settling scores (Roberts 2011).

The Guardian/LSE study blames antagonism towards the police upon the participants' previous criminal histories and not on the police's role as defenders of class hierarchy, defenders of capital and keepers of an unjust peace. Yet, the police are looking at major cuts after years of corruption, bad press, scandals – de Menezes, deaths in custody – and failures of process, racism within the force, taking bribes and kickbacks, selling the drugs they confiscate, farming out actual work to subcontracted half-beats and leaning on the Police Federation to present them as human. In an exemplary initiative, the Association of Chief Police Officers attempted their own diversionary tactic to distract from the Police's perceived failings at putting down the insurrection;

August also showed the ability of the police to restore order using robust, common sense policing in the British way (Prasad 2011).

The idea that there is a specifically British mode of policing – the redoubtful Bobby – is mockery in the extreme, flying in the face of the control function required from the Force today. Even if it remains astonishing that there can be any residual "moral" expectation that the police behave with respect and decency, widespread awareness and realisation that this cannot be the case in the era of austerity prevails. The fictional and amiable Bobby does not kill in custody, does not do the bidding of the Employers Federation, does not stand by while peoples' houses burn, does not mount water cannon, Jankel battle trucks, or threaten armed response in the mythos of a "British way" of

policing. In this fantasy, protests would be respected, injustices repaired and cops who kill would go to court and prison. The moral expectation here is not just a media phenomenon, nor can it be reduced to ethnicity, community or democratic values – it flies in the face of the evidence of the Police as a violent force of control, and August 2011 was yet another one of its thousand nadirs.

This Police public relations crisis is where we see a distinct break from the previous occasion the Conservative party entered Downing Street. When Margaret Thatcher came to power in 1979, her Home Secretary (William Whitelaw, 1st Viscount Whitelaw, KT, CH, MC, PC, DL) famously hugely improved police pay and conditions. The police obviously felt indebted to the incoming Conservative Government for their new conservatories, which enabled the political deployment of the police throughout the 1981 uprisings, the miners' strike and the battle of Wapping.²² Whitelaw was the Home Secretary whose term covered the summer when London, and England, was again burning, with large-scale disturbances in Liverpool, Birmingham, Manchester, Sheffield, Leeds and several areas of London. Whitelaw also implemented the expensive and ineffectual policy of the "short, sharp, shock" for young offenders. In contrast today, the Police are feeling "despised" by the UK Government's attack on their pensions, resources and working practices (Tully 2012).

As Sukant Chandan writes, the "youth have been without effective guidance".²³ If there was a Left resurgence, it might fight for the permanent dismantling of any possibility of such state renegade/retrogressive opportunist – training programme/pogrom – activity. The youth of August 2011 showed how capital can be threatened, irrespective of analysis and theory. It remains to be seen if the commentators and "programmes", role models and workfare, uniforms and prisons, can quash this spirit. Our complaint is that in place of theoretically and politically informed analysis, what we were offered instead was not so much inadequate, as plain misdirection. For example, the focus upon new media, as shown in "Reading the Riots" (Roberts 2011), and in nearly every media report at the time and since (e.g. BBC Radio Four August 7, 2011, BBC Newsnight August 12, 2011, Guardian July 4, 2012,²⁴ etc.), presented the uprising as an electronic contagion, effectively eschewing context altogether, though also linking the uprisings to some of the more fanciful stories about the

22. In another text, we might render the Newspaper Baron of Wapping as a Harkonnen leader from the Planet Dune, perhaps a Dark Lord. His fall from grace before the Leveson Inquiry, with his Number One Son having to take the sword – he only Johnny Marbles' well-aimed pie – brings the allegory neatly home.

23. See his text on the riots and black youth organisation at <http://sonsofmalcolm.blogspot.co.uk/2012/08/black-power-perspective-on-2011-aug.html> – retrieved August 29, 2012

24. Actually, the *Guardian* report on custodial sentences is an exemplar of horrific numeration. Cold graphs and pie-charts document the 3000 plus incarcerations, with an average custodial sentence of 16 months. This is a statistical bludgeoning that beggars belief. Admirable perhaps that readers are left to draw their own conclusions, but it is still the case that wider contextualisation is not broached – "Riots broken down: who was in court and what's happened to them" *Guardian* July 4, 2012 – <http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2012/jul/04/riot-defendants-court-sentencing> – retrieved August 29, 2012

Arab Spring, but without really offering an analysis of this and the way those events were a culmination of many years of organisation. The new media explanation in particular appears almost as if it were an advertising campaign for Twitter, Blackberry and Facebook, but with no critique of these media companies as profit-making concerns. The rebranding of social media as political tool was stalled at the same time, in a hand-wringing anxiety that again sat mesmerised before a youth culture it could not understand, but wanted still to subsume.

Clerical-Hysterical

We have identified a series of mind tricks that distract us from what is substantially at stake in the wake of the uprisings of August 2011. The deceptions are to some degree intended, but also tinged with self-serving denial, complicity and cynical myopia. This is the art of politics, just as much as it is Jedi duplicity. One set of arguments we have made would suggest that the “rioters” are portrayed within a framework of stereotype and racism. Another set of arguments suggest that these riots were exactly the riots we had to have – the ground for the disturbances was prepared by a commodity celebrity culture where role models are vacuous and the equation of value to exchange is a threadbare fiction – new trainers and sports clothes from Primark do not make the cut. Other commentators would have us look elsewhere to say we have seen it all before, and we agree, but think that a mere gestural reference to austerity does not get to the heartless heart of the Big Society. In a year of commentary, the production of a class of complicit pundits, more or less in the pay of property, capital and privilege, amounts to a more or less “obvious campaign to white-wash the uprising, to turn it into anything but resistance to the deeply white supremacist nature of this country”.²⁵ The story is more complicated, yet the truth more simple: Capital in a time of crisis needs a good cop bad cop routine, bread and circuses, and fire and brimstone. There were two Augusts: we have the Olympics and the gangs to dissuade us from really having a look at what ruling class tricks have us ensnared.

Our assessment is that a major unacknowledged force hides behind the machinations that have brought us the Big Society and its symbiotic twins, the August riots, the Olympic distraction. Alongside this, a military juridical persecution and surveillance state that has armed the capital, drills its youth into the discipline of low-paid labour or internships in sweated service sectors, uniforms or jail. There is an escalated persecution complex that has just cause in that black and Asian youth are stopped in the street, demonised in the press and pilloried in the dock by a white supremacist and racist co-ordination that brooks no opposition. And there is next to no wider public opposition to this

25. Chandan, <http://sonsofmalcolm.blogspot.co.uk/2012/08/black-power-perspective-on-2011-aug.html> – retrieved August 29 2012.

because the pundits and commentators will not face the ways rhetorical flourish breeds complicity and protects property. The economic imperative couples with the control society. No-one can deny that many young people hate the police with good cause. A death in custody was the trigger, but stop and search, surly attitudes, bus dragnets, corruption, payola and more, while not endearing to police to anyone, were not the only operative factors. A wider agenda underpins the particularities of the day. Racism and class war act as a diversionary, hardly recognised, all-too-impactful deceit and distraction. We saw it on our screens, but could not name it as the Fire Brigades and Police were defending prime property while letting lesser capital burn. What an outrage, but only to be expected given where we are just now in the volatile process of cyclical accumulation. The valorisation/conversion of expropriated surplus value through circulation within a stag-flationary recession that favours write-offs and fire-sales means petit bourgeois traders suffer alongside the lumpenised masses. Meanwhile, big Capital strives to recoup what minimal profit can be scarpered away before the fire-sale season ends. The super rich survive, so far only slightly singed by the scandals, to then pounce to buy up the scorched earth as a bloody trophy upon which a new phase of accumulation is inaugurated. Class and location maps onto race and privilege to differentiate the cartography of valorised capital under the restructuring, the so-call "crisis" we are all in together. An alternative is brewing, and we write this looking for another hot August.

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